

The Message

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Summary: It's the beginning of the end for Simba and his friends, as the Interceptor brings a shocking message...

Chapter 1: Chapter 1: Virusi

AN: The end begins here, if that makes any sense to you. This is the first story of the three-part finale. It's what this series had been leading up to. I hope you like it.

The Message

Chapter One: Virusi

"I like it..."

The Interceptor was finishing off the juicy remains of a mouse he had just caught. It was sweet, salty and crunchy. The perfect reward for a successful hunt. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so exhilarated...

Almost as good as killing Shocker, he thought, licking the gory remains of the mouse from the tips of his claws. He swallowed the rest, savouring the taste as he licked his muzzle clean of the blood. *Almost*.

The Interceptor stared down at the ground, knowing that his greatest enemy—a psychopathic cub by the name of Shocker—was buried far below. He enjoyed the thought of the immortal villain choking on earth again and again and again. For all eternity. It was an eternal execution.

And every time he resurrected, Shocker would think of him. That was the best part of all.

The Interceptor slashed the ground with his claws as he walked away, as if that would somehow communicate with Shocker, who was buried several miles away. "Sweet dreams, you little brat."

He walked along through the scenery of the jungle, taking a sniff of the evening air. He frowned, ever so slightly disappointed that he couldn't detect the scent of any more mice nearby... He was quite looking forward to another hunt. It was his favourite pastime, after all. Killing creatures that were much smaller than him... It felt so rewarding.

The Interceptor stopped at the edge of a river which cut right through the trees. He was able to cross a large fallen tree trunk that bridged the gap, however, and passed it with ease. He scanned the area carefully with his meticulous eyes, and came to a startling conclusion.

The jungle was boring.

Yes. It had to be the most boring place on earth. He was sure of it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually felt at home here. All the business with Shocker becoming his 'partner' just managed to make him feel even more bored. Wasn't there a kingdom somewhere that had a horde of marauding wildebeest he could chase? At least then he would be using his talents to their fullest extent...

This place is so dull, the Interceptor thought, knocking a rock aside. It rolled into a bush with a slight rustling noise. The jungle seemed so peaceful right now. Any other animal residing there would appreciate the tranquillity of the area. But the Interceptor, of course, despised it. He wanted some noise. He wanted some action. Something that he could sink his teeth into and tear apart with his claws!

"This is so *boring*!" the Interceptor complained aloud, thrusting his forepaws into the air and slamming himself against the trunk of a tree. "Something has to happen around this miserable place. Something better than just mice!"

He gnashed his teeth together. It was the only sound that could be heard in the jungle. Otherwise, everything else was silent. "Come on... Someone try to kill me. Anything. I want blood!"

The Interceptor turned his head—

—and his look of anger suddenly changed to one of horror.

At first, he assumed he was just hallucinating. But the smell of rotting flesh was far too potent for that to be the case.

"What the hell...?"

He edged closer to the ugly sight, wondering what in the world had caused it.

A body?

The body of a cub was lying up against a tree, reduced to nothing more than scraps and bones. Most likely the work of starving buzzards, the Interceptor assumed. All that remained were a few chunks of dead flesh dangling from the bones and a rusty golden staff protruding from an empty ribcage, stained with dry blood.

The Interceptor lowered his head, staring into the empty eye sockets of the cub's skull. "Someone really had a party with you, didn't they?" he muttered, raking his claws across the skeleton's brittle ribs.

His paw fell on the golden staff, although it looked to be at least a thousand years old by now. He stroked the edge of it, wondering if the object had any sort of useful purpose. *Probably magical*, he thought, examining it closely.

He gripped the edge of the staff tightly, wrenching it out of the cub's shattered ribcage with an unpleasant cracking noise. A few shards of bone fell to the ground, as the Interceptor held up the thing.

"Well, *this* is something interesting," he commented, feeling the magical object. He noticed that the staff felt quite hollow in his grip; if it was magical, then the magic had been drained out of it for a long time. "I wonder who this belonged to?"

Deciding that the staff would be of no more use to him, the Interceptor threw it into a nearby bush, where no one would ever find it.

"Sorry, cub," he said to the skeleton. "I could have hunted you down instead of some idiot with a staff. I would have made your death a bit more interesting, too."

The soulless eye sockets of the cub's skull stared blankly at him; the Interceptor would have been lying if he said that he didn't find it somewhat startling.

"See ya round, kid," he said, before turning and leaving the body behind.

The Interceptor walked off down a dirt path, forgetting all about the body of the cub a few minutes later. He was far too focused on more pressing matters—such as finding the next mouse to kill or thinking about how boring life was in the jungle.

He was too far away by the time the evil chuckles sounded...

"I hate it when things just wash up here," Chambo complained. "I'm sick of it."

Chambo lived in the Wet Lands: the kingdom of a pride that was well known for housing the most enormous river that could be found for hundreds of miles. The place was never short of fresh drinking water. That was for sure.

"Stop grumbling," said Chambo's friend, a lion called Uzofu. "We have a job to do, and that's that."

The pride's king had employed Chambo and Uzofu to look after the river. The kingdom often had a problem with junk washing up on its banks; it could come from anywhere and everywhere. There was no telling what might surface next...

"Yeah, but I'm sick of this job," Chambo replied, plucking something green and sloppy out of the river. It stretched on for as far as the eye could see, giving animals the false impression that it was endless. "Seaweed? In a river? That's just ridiculous!"

"Anything washes up here," Uzofu said, gathering up some sticks from the water. "You know that by now—we've been doing this for three years. It hardly surprises *me*."

"Well, maybe we should think about another career," Chambo said, sitting himself down on the edge of the river. "There would have been plenty of work in the Pride Lands—if they were still around. We could have been royal advisors! I mean, who else are they gonna get? A hornbill?" He chuckled at his joke.

"These are the easiest," Uzofu said, picking up a few leaves and piling them up on the ground. "Leaves always wash up here. The key is to pile them up so they all stick together. That way none of them will ever slip back inside the river."

"Whatever," Chambo said, turning away from the river. He felt sick. Sick of doing the same thing for the past three years. Day in, day out. Nothing ever seemed to change. "I wish something *exciting* would wash up here..."

"Be careful what you wish for," Uzofu responded, shooting him a disapproving glare. "You just might get it."

Chambo rolled his eyes. "Sure," he said sarcastically.

Splash!

The sudden sound of thrashing water caused the two lions to turn around, staring in surprise at the river.

"What the—?" Uzoefu exclaimed in surprise.

The oddest thing of all had washed up on the riverbank.

It appeared to be a throbbing green jelly-like mass of gunk, dripping with disgusting slime. It was pulsating slightly, as if alive.

"What the hell is that thing?" asked Uzoefu, stepping towards it. "I've never seen anything like it before... It's incredible."

He slowly reached out to touch the mass of gloop with a paw, only for Chambo to bat it away.

"Don't touch it," he scolded. "You don't know what the heck it is."

Uzoefu scoffed. "Chambo, I've been doing this for three years," he told him. "I think I can handle something that's a little bit green and gooey. Just let me do my work."

Chambo averted his gaze, turning away for just a second.

But it was just enough for him to miss seeing Uzoefu getting sucked right into the bulging blob.

He returned his attention to his friend, only to realise that he had disappeared.

"Uzoefu?" He looked around for any sign of him—but he was nowhere to be found. "Uzoefu?"

Suddenly, the green jelly-like mass began to quiver and bubble. With the sound of a boil bursting open, it exploded, covering Chambo with gunk and slime. He recoiled in disgust, trying to shake the disgusting fragments off of his body.

He looked up just in time to see someone standing where the mass of gloop had once been. It was a lion, although it was unlike any lion Chambo had ever seen. He was covered completely in black fur, with two blinking red eyes staring right into his soul.

"It's good to be back," said the lion, stretching out his legs. His gaze soon fell upon Chambo, who was staring at him in horror. "Ooh... hello, there."

"Who... who are you?" Chambo stammered, backing away. He had never seen anything like this before in his life. It completely defied all of his beliefs.

The lion merely stepped towards him, lifting up one of his paws and extending his index claw. It changed colour from black to an almost magma-like red. He smiled, poking Chambo in the shoulder with it. "Ouch."

Chambo examined the wound. It was only a small pinprick. But before long, he soon began to notice that his flesh was bubbling and crawling an ugly orangey red colour. The small wound expanded across his whole body, boiling him alive as he let out a shrill scream. Before he even knew it, his body burst into flames.

Within seconds, there was nothing left of Chambo.

The lion walked on casually across the much drier land, still with a pleased smile on his face.

"Look out, everyone. Virusi is in town!"

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2: Clash of the Villains**

Chapter Two: Clash of the Villains

The Interceptor had given up on trying to find another mouse to hunt, so he found a nearby tree stump and then sat himself down on it. The jungle felt emptier than ever. It was as if all life and matter had ceased to be. He felt like the only animal living there. All was silent.

"I need something to hunt," he said to himself, the desire to kill just bubbling up inside of him. "Something... or someone..."

Those cubs, he told himself, thinking of Simba, Nala and Haiba. *You could hunt them down. That's exciting, isn't it?*

Simba, Nala and Haiba had caused the Interceptor more than enough misery in his life. It was their fault that he came into contact with Shocker in the first place. If he had never met them, then the ensuing chaos would have been just a dream. A fantasy that he needn't worry about. He hated them sometimes...

"Stupid cubs," the Interceptor snarled. But then he rolled his eyes, knowing that there was no way he would ever chase them down. Whether he liked it or not, Simba and his friends had helped him to destroy Shocker once and for all. If it wasn't for them, then the villainous cub would still be alive and kicking, as opposed to being buried six feet under the ground.

He just wasn't interested anymore, anyway. The cubs foiled each of his plans every time, no matter how hard he tried. It was like they were invincible. They just seemed to be insanely skilled at fighting against villains. He couldn't understand it. How were a bunch of cubs so strong? It didn't make any sense. Grown lions had fought for years in wars and battles and still ended up lying dead in a field somewhere, mangled to bits.

What makes you so special? the Interceptor wondered, thinking of the cubs. *You can't be this lucky for so long...*

The Interceptor was going to ponder on the subject for a while longer, but then a sudden scream cut through the peaceful atmosphere like a knife, instantly catching his attention. He jumped up from the tree stump, alert and ready to do something.

"A scream?" he said, suddenly fleeing quite excited. He let out one of his classic eagle-like screeches. *"I like it!"*

The Interceptor raced off in the direction of the scream, hoping that he had finally found some kind of violent event for him to witness. Maybe there was a serial killer stalking the jungle that he could kill. As long as it was something, he was pleased. This jungle was slowly beginning to drive him insane. He made a mental note to find a kingdom to inhabit the next morning. Then he could find some animals to hunt down...

The Interceptor leapt over a fallen log, sprinting across the ground with amazing speed. He could see that the trees up ahead were opening out to reveal a clearing. He appreciated the exhilaration coursing through his veins; he hadn't felt so excited in such a long time. Not since burying Shocker and laughing at his eternal fate...

He skidded to a halt at the opening to the clearing, and soon saw the full extent of the situation. The body of a lion was lying limply on the ground. He wasn't dead yet, but it was quite clear that he was very close to perishing.

"Hmm..." said the Interceptor in curiosity, striding calmly over to the lion. He was gasping and choking for breath; the Interceptor could see blood oozing out from a deep gash in his neck. The wound was fatal. He knew that from experience. "Wonder if you're any relation to that dead cub I found earlier?"

The Interceptor almost stumbled back in alarm as the dying lion suddenly grabbed him, eyes wide with terror. His claws dug into his skin.

"He's coming!" the lion yelled fearfully, clutching the Interceptor as tightly as he possibly could. He could feel the lion's life slowly ebbing away; he didn't have very long left. "He is coming!"

"Who's coming?" asked the Interceptor, trying to pull away from the lion. But he wouldn't let go.

"The sickness," said the lion, tears streaming down his cheeks. "The sickness is coming... It's coming..."

"The sickness?" said the Interceptor, raising an eyebrow. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"He will kill... kill you," the lion said. But he was far too weak to say any more. He slowly fell to his back, gagging as the blood loss finally took a hold of him. His eyes flickered shut, and he died.

The Interceptor looked up, wondering what kind of creature had caused this lion's death. He turned the dead animal onto his side, examining the deep gash in the side of his neck. It was long, and quite deep. Blood was still leaking out of it. It looked like the work of a claw, although it was unlike any claw the Interceptor had ever seen.

If this was a lion, then he has some weird claws, he thought, narrowing his eyes in confusion. The wound certainly wasn't caused by any other animal. They rarely attacked other lions. Usually, they attacked each other.

The Interceptor noticed that the area around the wound was glowing an orangey red colour; it almost looked like magma. *What the hell happened here?* He'd never seen anything like it before. Whoever the 'sickness' was, they were certainly the most abnormal kind of killer the Interceptor had ever encounter.

I've gotta find this guy, the Interceptor thought. *If I can kill him, then everyone will know that I'm the best hunter around here!*

He looked over the grassy surface of the ground, and soon noticed a faint trail of blood leading back into the trees. The Interceptor smiled. "I like it!" he exclaimed, knowing that finding this 'sickness' creature was going to be a lot easier than he first thought. He could just picture the feeling of sinking his teeth into that killer's flesh and taking his place as the greatest hunter of the jungle. No one would ever mess with him. He would become the most feared presence around!

The Interceptor chuckled evilly, following the trail of blood. *I'm coming for you, 'sickness',* he thought. *You'd better watch out for the Interceptor. I like it!*

After killing the lion—simply for getting in the way of his journey—Virusi continued into the jungle, blood dripping from his elongated index claw. It was still glowing red, like magma, with the promise that it would bring more and more deaths.

That was what he was planning on.

Virusi raked his claw across the tree trunks as he walked past them; they slowly began to shrivel up and die, branches falling to the ground as he continued on his way. He hummed a little tune to himself, happy as he went about his journey.

"Very clever trick," said a voice from nearby.

Virusi turned to see the Interceptor lying on a rock, staring casually up at the sky. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm sure you know all about me," replied the Interceptor. "I'm the Interceptor. The best hunter in the world."

"Never heard of you," said Virusi, raising his lengthy index claw. "Now, get out of my way—or I will make you *burst*."

"Oh, I'm so scared of your girly little nails," the Interceptor said, affecting a look of mock fear. "What a joke. I saw what you did to that lion a couple of miles back. Gave him a nasty little cut on his neck. I wondered what kind of claw could cause such a wound. Looks like I know now." He raised an eyebrow at Virusi's elongated claw. "Not as impressive as I thought."

"Careful," said Virusi, pointing the claw threateningly in his direction. "I'm contagious."

"What? Like a yawn?" joked the Interceptor, unafraid of the evil lion. "Don't make me laugh. I've seen cubs with more power than you. I buried one of them six feet under the ground. I'm pretty sure I could do the same to you."

With an angry yell, Virusi lunged at the Interceptor. But he soon dodged out of the way, avoiding the touch of his deadly appendage.

The Interceptor stared at the glowing thing in bemusement. "Just what is that thing supposed to do?"

"I am a living... virus," he replied, wagging the claw at him, "and my name is Virusi."

"Nice," remarked the Interceptor. "Original name."

"I can kill you instantly," said Virusi, stepping towards him. "It all depends on the mood I'm in. My first victims were two lions by the side of the river. *There was nothing left of them.* I was nicer with that other lion; he was only in my way. I don't take kindly to animals blocking my path. Like *you*." He raised his claw. "Your cells will boil until there is only dust and ashes. I'm much more than just a common cold."

"I can take you down," the Interceptor said confidently, extending his own claws. "Don't think that a pushy little 'virus'—or whatever the hell you are—is going to stop me. You'll be on the ground in seconds."

Virusi chuckled. "Try it," he challenged. "See where it gets you."

The Interceptor growled, leaping at Virusi.

But the deadly lion retaliated with his own claws, slashing the Interceptor across the chest and sending him crashing right into a tree. Wood splintered down on him. He held his forepaws in front of his face for protection.

"That went well," Virusi said drily. "Do you want to try again?"

The Interceptor stumbled to his paws, looking livid with the villain. "I can do this all day."

"It's a shame I can't," Virusi retorted, and drove his lethal claw towards the Interceptor's throat...

AN: A cliffhanger involving the Interceptor in danger? There's something you don't see everyday. It seems that this new villain Virusi is causing some problems. A living virus? That's interesting. But is he the big threat the cubs have been worried about? We'll see...

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: Virusi's Job

AN: Some interesting reactions towards the start of the finale. But it's only the beginning, so there's a bit more to go. Only seventeen chapters left after these two, you know.

anonymous13: Well, the character of Virusi is based off a villain from an animated movie called *Osmosis Jones*. Thus, I can say that he has the voice of Laurence Fishburne. Well done to everyone who got the reference, by the way. I assumed that film was quite obscure. I like being proved wrong, for once.

the-mysterious-other: I never said he was the biggest threat...

Chapter Three: Virusi's Job

The Interceptor grabbed Virusi's foreleg at the last moment, saving himself from having his throat impaled on his deadly claw. The living virus was still able to display his enormous strength, however, and slammed the Interceptor right up against a tree. The hunter could feel its trunk crumpling against his back.

Virusi grabbed the Interceptor by the throat with one paw and lifted him a foot off the ground; he tried to drive his claw right into one of the Interceptor's eyes. Grunting, the lion tried to hold the living virus away with both forepaws. The fatal appendage was a mere inch away from penetrating his eye...

Virusi chuckled, knowing that he had the Interceptor right where he wanted him. There was no way he could escape... His death was imminent. "You should have known not to mess with me... Prepare to *dissolve*."

The Interceptor kicked with his hind legs, hitting Virusi right in the stomach and sending him stumbling back. He wobbled, desperately trying to regain his balance. But it didn't work. The living virus fell right back into a bush.

The Interceptor laughed, letting out a screech of victory. "Yes! *I like it!*" he roared, staring down at the fallen Virusi. "Not so deadly now, are you?"

The bush withered and died as Virusi emerged from it, becoming nothing more than ashes. His lengthy index claw seemed to be glowing brighter than ever before, as if exhibiting his anger. He could see steam pouring out from the tip of it. "You are really beginning to get on my nerves."

"Oh, I'm getting on *your* nerves?" the Interceptor retorted, glaring at him. "You've been annoying me from the moment I first saw you. I don't need a stupid virus getting in my way, thank you very much."

"I really don't have time for you," Virusi told him. "I've got a job to do. And a plan to put in motion."

"A plan?" The Interceptor narrowed his eyes at the living virus, curious. *You mean this germ with an attitude problem actually has a plan?* "You mean to tell me that you *want* something?"

"I was only born half an hour ago," Virusi informed him, much to the Interceptor's surprise. "My... creator has planted information in my head. A list of instructions. I know *exactly* what I have to do."

"How can you be born half an hour ago?" the Interceptor questioned. "That's impossible."

"My 'shell' washed up by the side of a river," Virusi said, "and out I came. It's very simple, if you have the right creator."

"Your father must be very good at his job, then," said the Interceptor. "He must 'get busy' quite often."

"He walked this earth once before," Virusi said. "And ever since, he's stayed in the shadows. I've been sent to start his plan in motion. And no one—not even an annoying lion like you—is going to stop me."

"So, basically, you're just doing his dirty work," the Interceptor concluded. "You're like a slave. *Ha!* How pathetic." He shook his head. *I was worried about him? He's nothing more than a pawn for someone else!*

"No one insults me," Virusi snarled, pointing his elongated claw right at his chest. "You've caused enough trouble in the last five minutes. And I'm going to make sure that you never bother anyone again."

The Interceptor glanced at the claw—looking completely unfazed by it now—and then stared into the eyes of the living virus. "So, what's your plan? Take over the jungle and start a claw salon?"

The virus just chuckled, turning his back on him. "Oh, that's just rich," he said, placing a paw up against a tree. "You think

we only want this jungle? No. No way. What we want is something much bigger. And it doesn't start here."

"What are you talking about?" the Interceptor demanded, bemused by the virus. It was obvious to him now that he was planning something deadly. Something that could affect all the animals in the jungle... and him. That was the most important part. "If it doesn't start here, then where *does* it start?"

"I assume you're familiar with that kingdom known as the Pride Lands, right?" asked Virusi, eliciting a look of shock from the Interceptor. "It is quite popular."

"Of course I know what it is," replied the Interceptor, thinking of the enormous kingdom. But it had been dead for such a long time now. He was there at the moment of its destruction. It was hollowed out by those alien creatures, the Vimelea... Lava spurted from their mouths and the place was annihilated. All that remained was an enormous crater in the ground. He didn't think anyone would ever mention the kingdom ever again. "The place has been gone for ages now."

"I know," said Virusi, smiling widely at him. He obviously knew something that the Interceptor didn't. "That's the entire point."

Realisation suddenly dawned on the Interceptor. "Are you telling me that the Pride Lands were destroyed for a *reason*?"

"You could say that," Virusi responded. "And now it's finally time to bring the kingdom back."

"Bring it back?" exclaimed the Interceptor. "And just how are you going to do that? Last time I checked, there was nothing left. You can't do anything."

"You underestimate the power of magic, Interceptor," Virusi told him. "The truth of the matter is that the Pride Lands *can* be brought back. You just need to know where to look."

"Is it something mystical?" asked the Interceptor sarcastically. "Do you have to 'look inside yourself' and find the answer or something? I haven't got time for that blue fairy nonsense. I don't believe in it."

The living virus just laughed. "You really are an idiot," he said. "You don't know anything that's going on, do you? I need to find someone called the Hermit of Hekima. He holds all the answers. Of course, he doesn't like to admit it... but I can change that."

"Who?" the Interceptor said. He'd never heard of the Hermit of Hekima. Whoever he was, he certainly *sounded* mystical.

"Bringing the Pride Lands back isn't even my first job," Virusi said. "I would have washed up by a river closer to the kingdom, otherwise. My first task is to destroy some certain... *enemies* that might get in the way."

"You're an assassin," the Interceptor realised. "Hmm... that was my old line of work—before I retired."

"My creator sent me to kill three cubs by the names of Simba, Nala and Haiba," Virusi explained. "I know exactly where their home is. Once I'm finished with you, they'll be next on my list."

I had a feeling, thought the Interceptor, somehow knowing that this virus was connected with Simba, Nala and Haiba. After all, all the psychopaths seemed to be after them. Even him, at one point. It was only natural that Virusi wanted to kill them as well. *Looks like they're going to need some help...*

"If you think you're getting your nails on them then you've got another thing coming," the Interceptor told him. "They eat creeps like you for breakfast."

"Is that so?" asked Virusi. "Well... they haven't met me yet. Their skin is gonna sizzle and burn."

"Not if I can help it," the Interceptor challenged. "I can warn them."

Yeah, he thought. *Just do what you did last time: use them to get rid of your troubles. It'll be just like killing Shocker.* He smiled at the thought.

"You won't live long enough to warn *anyone*," Virusi said, and launched himself right at the Interceptor.

Instinctively, the Interceptor flipped Virusi over with his forepaws, and the living virus was sent flying right into a nearby river. The hunter watched as the water bubbled and boiled momentarily, followed by silence.

Virusi never resurfaced.

"Yes! *I like it!*" the Interceptor yelled triumphantly, hopping into the air at the thought of him defeating the living virus.
"How's that for a cure?"

Not wanting to hang around any longer, the Interceptor raced off in the direction of Jowai Resort. He knew that was where the cubs lived. His plan was simple now. Tell them about Virusi and that this Hermit of Hekima creature knew how to bring back the Pride Lands.

It'll be all too easy, the Interceptor thought, smiling as he got further and further away from the scene of his battle with the living virus. *They can have their kingdom back—and I can find some wildebeest to hunt...*

As the Interceptor ran off into the distance, he never looked back once at the river he had thrown Virusi into. He never saw the water ripple and boil as the living virus emerged from the river, alive and well. He wasn't an animal—he was just a virus who took the shape of an animal. He couldn't drown.

Virusi rose up onto dry land, looking angrier than ever before. His red eyes were glowing with a fiery intensity. His claw looked ready to erupt with magma. His mouth was twisted in a livid snarl.

"Things just got more personal."

Chapter 4: Chapter 4: The Crying Cub

Chapter Four: The Crying Cub

"Well, this is certainly a better day," Haiba said, looking up at the sky from his spot by the side of the river. "You know, for a while, I thought those clouds signalled that something incredibly bad was going to happen."

The weather had been quite erratic over the past few weeks, especially considering that the climate for the jungle was usually hot and sunny. But instead, grey clouds blotted out the sky. It even rained quite heavily at one point. Haiba tried not to think about that, though. It reminded him of his time living in a cave when he was dealing with his guilt over killing Tama...

"The weather *has* gotten better," Nala said optimistically, smiling at the sunlight shining down on her. "Maybe it's a sign that things are going to get better for us. I mean, we've had more than enough misery these past couple of months. It's about time something good happened for once."

The three cubs had suffered their fair share of trouble since the Pride Lands had been destroyed. They'd been very nearly eaten by cannibals, had their friends killed and almost seen their souls sucked right out of their bodies. They couldn't remember the last time they'd truly felt happy together.

Well, maybe that could change.

Simba emerged from the river, having been underneath the surface of the water for quite some time now. He inhaled a few deep gulps of oxygen, grateful for the relief. "Three minutes," he panted, feeling utterly exhausted. "Three minutes..."

"Yeah," Haiba said, nodding at him. "I was beginning to wonder when you might come back up again. I was going to send Nala in to look for you."

"Oh, thanks," said Nala, shooting him an angry glare. "You're a real pal, aren't you, Haiba?"

Haiba winked at her. "That's me," he said. "What are you holding your breath for, anyway, Simba?"

"Survival training," Simba explained as he clambered out of the water, sitting down on dry land. "The longer I can hold my breath underwater, the better. You never know when someone might try to drown you."

"Well, that's fine," Haiba said. "But what if they hold you under the water for more than three minutes? You're pretty much doomed, aren't you?"

"Oh, shut up," Simba said, waving a paw in the air to silence him. "I'll keep working on it. Practice makes perfect."

"Or practice wastes time," Haiba retorted. "Shouldn't you be thinking about the next big scheme to bring back the Pride Lands?"

"It's not a *scheme*," Simba said disapprovingly. "I just want to find someone who knows how to reverse this darn spell. No one in the jungle knows; I bet we'd have to travel a hundred miles to find a wizard who could reverse it. They sure like to keep to the shadows."

The spell that surrounded the Pride Lands still remained a mystery. It prevented the kingdom's remains from being tampered with in any magical or physical way. An evil serpent called Nyoka had provided them with one piece of information: that it was the dark work of the most horrifying being imaginable. Otherwise, they were pretty much none the wiser.

"Oh, it's not that bad," Haiba said, smiling. "We might have to travel *two hundred* miles. In comparison, one hundred really isn't that bad. It could be worse."

"It could be *better*!" Simba complained. "I don't know about you, but I'm really sick and tired of all these dead ends. I think I'll go and find someone to squeeze some answers out of later..."

"Simba, no," Nala said sternly. "I told you that you are not torturing any animals to get information."

"I don't see any other options," Simba said. "We have nothing. Literally, *nothing*. If this lack of information keeps up, we're going to spend the rest of our lives just rotting away in here."

"I don't know why you hate it so much," Nala said. "This is supposed to be the place every animal wants to live. But we spend most of our time trying to *get away* from it."

"It's not the same as home," Simba sighed, frowning. "I'm sick of the jungle. Just to see the Pride Lands again would be good enough for me. Instead, all we get is a giant hole in the ground. This really sucks."

"I know how you feel," Haiba said, sounding sympathetic towards Simba.

"Really?" asked Simba, surprised.

"Yeah," Haiba replied. "Think of all the females I could have gone out with. All those sticks, flowers and blades of grass... I miss them all." A tear escaped his eye; he wiped it away with his paw. "It's tough being me."

Simba rolled his eyes. "I think your losses are quite less significant compared to mine," he said. "I miss my home... I miss my parents... I miss *everything*. You two are lucky. At least you still have your mothers."

"Yeah. I don't know what I'd do without her," Nala agreed. She then looked around. "Wait a minute—where *is* my mother?"

"I have a bad feeling," Sarafina said, a suspicious look in her eyes. "Do you feel the same way, Zazu?"

"My life is filled with nothing but bad feelings, Sarafina," Zazu replied, perched on her shoulder. "I cannot distinguish one from the other. Whatever do you mean?"

Both the lioness and the hornbill were stood in a narrow area on the outskirts of the resort, hemmed in by bushes. The two had been accompanying each other quite frequently during their time in the resort. Sarafina supposed that Zazu was only speaking to her because she was the only other adult around. Unless he was trying to win her affections—but she wasn't interested in that...

"I feel like something is wrong," Sarafina explained. "The atmosphere... just doesn't feel right. That and the fact that I can hear something moving over there in the bushes."

"Something?" Zazu exclaimed, suddenly looking quite fearful. He inched closer to Sarafina, worriedly observing the area. "I hope it's not deadly..."

"Stop being such a chicken," Sarafina said, turning her head in the direction of the bushes. She could hear a felt rustling noise, followed by the sound of what she assumed was someone crying. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

"Maybe we should just leave, Sarafina," Zazu suggested. "I mean, after all, we're not exactly the strongest animals in the jungle. We're not cut out for fighting evil creatures from the pits of hell itself."

"Zazu, I'm pretty sure that whoever's crying isn't a creature from the pits of hell," Sarafina said, disproving his theory. "What kind of a monster cries?"

"Oh, I don't know," Zazu said, frowning as he folded his wings. "An emotionally distraught one?"

Sarafina shook her head and tenderly stepped into the bushes. "Hello? Who's there?"

The sound of crying got louder and louder as she carefully traversed through the greenery. She could tell that whoever it was, they sounded extremely terrified. Something very horrible—and, she assumed, deadly—had obviously frightened them. "Hello?"

With a sudden scream, Sarafina gasped as a cub leapt at her, sending her falling right onto her back. Zazu screamed and scattered into a nearby tree.

"Get off me!" Sarafina yelled, only to realise who it was. "Wait... *Ugaidi*?"

Sarafina had almost completely forgotten about Ugaidi. He was a cub who had turned up when Aibu wanted revenge on Simba, Nala and Haiba. He had been tortured senselessly by monstrous creatures. The cub had a very strange ability: he could tell the future. Or at least he had some sort of insight. He'd predicted several events in his constant state of fear, and they ended up occurring. They'd always assumed that there was something up with the cub; however, he was completely insane, so it was unlikely that they would ever discover the truth.

Ugaidi was lying on his side, shivering with fear. "He is coming... the sickness... to consume us all..."

Sarafina climbed to her paws, staring at the cub in confusion. "The... the sickness? What does that mean?"

"Your cells will burn," Ugaidi said, tilting his head to the side. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "You must run. Run away as fast as possible. Otherwise, you will all die. You will all die..." He broke down in tears, sobbing so loudly that it

hurt Sarafina's ears. The noise made him sound like a baby.

"He's predicting something again, Zazu," Sarafina said, only to find that the hornbill had vanished from sight. "Zazu? Where are you?"

"I'm up here," Zazu said, clinging to a nearby branch up above. "Has that cub stopped his frightening rant yet?"

"He's not going to harm you, Zazu," Sarafina said. "The poor cub's been tortured, for goodness' sake. Come down here."

"Very well," Zazu said, fluttering down onto Sarafina's shoulder. "But if something horrible happens, then I'm blaming you."

Sarafina smiled kindly at Ugaidi, lowering her head towards him. "Ugaidi," she spoke softly. "What is 'the sickness'?"

"The living virus," said Ugaidi, still shaking in terror. He curled up, as if to shield himself from the oncoming terror. "He takes the shape of you—but he is far from an animal. Everyone will burn... *Everyone!*" His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he succumbed to unconsciousness.

"Hmm..." Sarafina picked up the cub with a concerned expression on her face, and placed him across her back. "I think we should tell the others about this."

"Why?" Zazu asked. "The cub could just be spouting incoherent gibberish."

"I don't think so," Sarafina said, as she turned, starting for the resort. "I told you I had a bad feeling. Something is happening in the jungle... Something dangerous."

"Oh, dear," Zazu sighed, his body wilting. "I *hate* danger..."

"I'm gonna go look for her," Nala said, getting to her paws. "My mom disappears too many times for her own good."

"Maybe it's her revenge for the other day," Haiba said, following after her. "She was pretty worried where we'd disappeared to after that Camp Kazi incident."

"You said we went to an all-night 'love fest'," Nala said. "I'm beginning to think that saying we almost had our souls sucked out was a better idea."

"I don't even know what an all-night 'love fest' *is*," Simba said, causing Haiba to grin widely.

"You'll find out one of these days," he said, before chuckling to himself. "I've been to a few in my time..."

"I think I might speak to the Hermit of Hekima sometime," Simba said. "He might have heard something since we last saw him."

"Oh, I spoke to him the other day," Haiba said, although he soon covered his mouth with both forepaws. *Oops.*

"What?" Nala exclaimed.

"When did you last see the Hermit of Hekima?" Simba asked, staring at him confusedly. "We haven't spoken to him since he put that curse on me."

Haiba's mouth dropped open. For once, he was speechless. He hadn't told them that the Hermit of Hekima had visited him after he murdered Tama. No one was supposed to know. He certainly didn't ever plan on telling them. But now it seemed that he was caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Well—" Haiba began, but he was soon interrupted by another voice.

"Hey! Where are you cubs?" the voice yelled.

The three cubs turned their heads to see the Interceptor storming into the resort. They could see that he had three nasty cuts across his chest; he appeared to have been recently caught up in a fight.

"*The Interceptor?*" they exclaimed at once.

"That's right," said the Interceptor. "And I have a message for you."

AN: Ooh... a cliffhanger. But I think we all know what the Interceptor is going to say. Looks like he didn't kill Virusi, though. And just who is his creator? I think you might remember him... I'll stay quiet, though, just in case. I suppose I'll receive more and more theories now from you eager reviewers about what's going on. I look forward to reading them. See you tomorrow!

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 5: The Interceptor's Explanation**

AN: Who's ready for more of this finale? I sure am! I've heard a good few more theories from you on how the finale might proceed. I shall say nothing, though. I'm going to let you suffer right up until the final chapter. After that, you're free from my grasp of tension.

Guest: You think *I'm* evil? There are some authors who make their readers wait *weeks* for an update! I'm very generous in that department. You get something from me everyday.

the-mysterious-other: You won't know what to expect until all sixty-five stories are finished. I'm gonna keep you all guessing.

Chapter Five: The Interceptor's Explanation

"Wait, wait, wait," Simba said, striding towards the Interceptor in confusion. "What the heck are you doing here? We thought we'd seen the last of you after that business with Shocker. And now you're back again? Well, you can forget it if you think we're helping you again. We have our own problems to worry about."

He didn't have time for more of the Interceptor's troubles. They'd helped him already with Shocker, and that was enough, in his opinion. He wouldn't care if he never saw him ever again. Their business was concluded, as far as he was concerned.

"You don't listen much, do you, Simba?" said the Interceptor, staring him down. "I came here to help you out. In fact, once I've told you what I know, I think you'll worship me for ever and ever."

"Yeah, right," Simba scoffed, rolling his eyes. "There's about as much chance of the Pride Lands reappearing."

The Interceptor chuckled, suddenly with a smile on his face. "You really want your Pride Lands, don't you?" He knew that he was teasing the cub now. Taunting him with information that he didn't know. Well, if the cub was going to be so difficult, then he deserved a little suffering. "Don't you just *dream* of that kingdom?"

"What's your point?" Simba demanded. "If you're going to be like that, then you can just get out. *Or else.*" He slowly began to unsheathe his claws, ready to attack the villainous hunter if need be.

The Interceptor held up a paw, signalling for him to stop his intended attack. "Hold it, you impatient brat," he said. "If you weren't so annoying then maybe I would have told you my message by now."

"All right, so speak up," Nala said, joining Simba by his side. "It's not like you to show your face around here, anyway. Don't you have some mice to hunt or something?"

"I've had a bit more of an interesting morning when compared to hunting mice," the Interceptor told her. "And it led me here. Again. Just like with Shocker."

"Okay," Simba said. "What's your message?"

The Interceptor paused for a moment, and then blurted it out.

"You can bring back the Pride Lands."

The silence that followed was indescribable. Sound seemed to be sucked right out of the jungle. Simba, Nala and Haiba could only stare at the Interceptor in shock. The hunter was smiling. He knew that would grab their attention. After all, it was their ultimate goal. To restore their home to its former glory. He comfortably knew that they would be focused on him for the duration of his time here.

"Well?" said the Interceptor. "Aren't you going to say something?"

"How... how...?" Simba seemed—for once—to be lost for words. He never imagined that someone would tell him this, let alone the Interceptor. It just didn't seem possible. It was like one of those miserable dreams where you got everything you wanted, only for you to wake up moments later and realise that nothing at all has changed. "How... how...?"

"You're lying," Nala accused, pointing at him. She had an inkling that the Interceptor was going to try and bribe them with information that he didn't really possess. He probably wanted something from them. Food, most likely. Maybe it had become scarce in his part of the jungle... "I don't believe you."

"Oh, of course you don't," the Interceptor said. "I come in with the answer to all of your problems and you don't believe me. How typical. Liars don't trust liars. I almost forgot."

"How would you even know?" Haiba asked. To be honest, Haiba felt that he agreed more with Nala than he did with the Interceptor. "We've been searching for months to find the answer. And you managed it in one morning?"

"I was in the right place in the right time," the Interceptor replied. He seemed to have an answer for everything. Maybe that was an indicator that he was speaking the truth. "Perhaps it was destiny that you should find out."

"I don't believe in destiny," Simba said, speaking coherently for the first time since the Interceptor had told them his message. "And I know that you don't, either. Now, tell me what happened."

"You ever met a living virus before?" the Interceptor asked, prompting confused looks from the three cubs. "I guess not. Well, I saw one this morning."

"A living virus?" Haiba said incredulously, raising his eyebrows. "What's that, a floating sneeze? Oh, I'm so scared."

"I'm telling the truth," insisted the Interceptor. "He looked just like a lion. But he said that he was a living virus."

"So a living virus is disguising himself as a lion?" Nala said. "Well, I can't say we haven't seen disguises before..." She was reminded of Shauri: the false name of a soul-sucking monster known as the Thief. She grimaced at the thought of all his flesh peeling away like an article of clothing, revealing the slimy monster concealed within...

"Yep," agreed the Interceptor. "I found a lion dead on the ground about a mile up north. Not long after, I ran into the living virus. You could say we had a little... fight together." He gestured to the claw marks across his chest. They had a faint orangey tint to them around the outline, but the cubs didn't know what that meant... "I managed to kill him—but not before he told me his plan."

"Well, if you killed him, then that makes my job a lot easier," Simba told him. If there was a living virus running around, then Simba knew that it wouldn't be long before they met. And then he would have had to kill him. These days, it was his only option when faced with a threat. "Thanks, I guess."

"No problem," the Interceptor said. "Anyway, he was sent by his 'creator'—or whatever the hell that means—to kill you three."

"He wanted to kill us?" Nala said. "What for?"

"To stop you, of course," the Interceptor said. "You are the animals who defeat all of the psychos around here. You're the biggest threat around here—even if you don't think so."

Simba felt a slight pang of pride when he heard that. "Good," he said. "That was what I wanted: to become the biggest threat."

"*Become*?" said the Interceptor. He let out a dry laugh. "Simba, you've been the biggest threat around here since I first met you."

Simba considered this, and didn't argue with the Interceptor. It was true, in a way. Despite all the trouble—despite all the danger—they had always come out on top. They had been the biggest danger to anyone long before the Pride Lands were even destroyed. No one had ever been able to mess with them. That had to make them one of the most powerful creatures on earth.

"He wanted to take you out," the Interceptor told them, "so you couldn't cause any more trouble."

"But I don't understand," Nala interjected. "If there's an assassin after us, then what does that have to do with bringing back the Pride Lands?"

"Yeah," Haiba agreed. "It doesn't make any sense to me. But then, neither did that date I once had with some mud... Kissing has never been so sloppy."

"Haiba, this really isn't the time for your jokes," Simba scolded.

"Who's joking?" replied Haiba, confused.

Simba sighed, and then turned to the Interceptor. "Just answer Nala's question."

"The living virus said that once he was finished with you," he pointed a claw in their direction, "he was going to resurrect

the Pride Lands."

"How?" Simba questioned.

That was the one thing they wanted to know. *How?* The method. The instructions. The way to actually restore the land. They assumed that the only way was through magic. After all, there was a magical spell surrounding the Pride Lands that prevented any such alterations. Perhaps if the spell was broken, then the kingdom could be resurrected...

"Apparently," said the Interceptor, "someone called the Hermit of Hekima has the answers."

Simba's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"The Hermit of Hekima," the Interceptor repeated. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah," Simba said. "I know him."

He remembered that hermit all too well. The Hermit of Hekima was someone who they assumed would be able to try and break the spell that shrouded the Pride Lands. However, Simba had been neglecting his friends at the time, so the golden eagle placed a curse on him instead, leaving him with just three days to live. Eventually, after the curse had been broken, the hermit told the three cubs that he didn't know anything about the spell, and suggested that they consult a wizard. However, ever since, they had no such luck finding one.

And now, it was quite clear to Simba that the Hermit of Hekima was a liar.

"Well, he has the answer," the Interceptor told him. "He knows how to bring back the Pride Lands. That living virus was going to see him right after killing you three. Because he wanted the kingdom, too."

"So a bad guy wants to break the spell so he can have the kingdom back?" Nala said, scratching her head in confusion. "This is making my head hurt."

"It's all part of a plan," the Interceptor explained. "The plan of his 'creator'. But I don't know who that is."

"Who is his creator?" Simba inquired.

"I don't know," the Interceptor said. "He said that he walked the earth once before. And ever since, he's stayed in the shadows. Whatever that means."

"We have to get to the Hermit of Hekima," Simba declared, looking in the direction of the desert. "If he's been lying to us, then I want to know the truth."

"We can't just go to the Hermit of Hekima," Nala said. "Shouldn't we come up with a plan or something first?"

"We don't need a plan," Simba told her. "It's not like he's going to try and kill us. But he's hiding something. And I want to know what it is. Now, come on." It wasn't long before he was hurrying off.

"Hey! Wait up, Simba!" Nala cried, running after him. "You could have giving us a little warning first!"

The Interceptor glanced down at Haiba as they calmly strode after the two. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"You're not the only one," replied Haiba. For whatever reason, he felt uneasy.

He just didn't know why.

As the four of them were leaving the resort, a sudden crashing sound stopped them right in their tracks.

"What was that?" Haiba exclaimed, looking around frantically.

They soon saw that a tree had collapsed a few feet away from them. The Interceptor's eyes widened in horror when he saw the orangey red marks all over it. "Oh, no."

From a mist of steam, Virusi emerged, his face twisted in an angry snarl. Clearly, the living virus hadn't been killed in the river, as the Interceptor first thought. He was very much alive and kicking.

He pointed his deadly claw straight at the Interceptor, burning on the inside with hatred.

"You're going to regret what you did to me."

Chapter 6: Chapter 6: Attack of the Virus

Chapter Six: Attack of the Virus

The Interceptor stormed right towards the virus, pointing right at him with a claw. "I thought I killed you earlier!"

"Yeah," said Virusi, looking like he felt incredibly unthreatened by the lion. "You tried to drown me *in a river*. I'm a living virus! Not an animal! I can't drown!"

Realisation soon hit the Interceptor. "Damn it," he cursed. Of course. It all made sense to him now. You can't kill a virus with water. It won't do anything. He was going to need a much more permanent way of finishing him off...

"*That's* a living virus?" Nala exclaimed, taking a tentative step towards the evil creature. "To be honest, I was hoping for something a little... uglier. You look like any other psychotic lion to me."

"He looks a little like Death, don't you think?" Haiba whispered in Nala's ear. "I mean, just look at those eyes."

"I see what you mean," Nala agreed. "Maybe they're related..."

Virusi chuckled at the sight of the three cubs. "You're all making this too easy for me," he said. "Not only is this annoying freak here, but so are my first three targets!" He gestured to them with both forepaws, brandishing his vicious claw. "I think I'm gonna enjoy this."

"Who the heck are you?" Simba demanded, pushing past Nala and the Interceptor to face the living virus. "And just what is it that you're planning?"

"Simba," said Virusi, placing a paw to his chin. "You're the biggest problem of all, according to my creator. I think you'll be the first to die."

"Yeah, whatever," Simba said, unafraid of the monster. He'd faced far worse than this living virus before. Compared to Hago or Death, this guy was a piece of cake. "So who's your creator? And why does he want the Pride Lands?"

"Now, why would I tell you?" the living virus retorted. "You're just about as slippery as that idiot over there." He jerked his elongated claw in the direction of the Interceptor, who looked extremely offended at the insult. "There's no telling what you'll do to try and stop me."

"I'll kill you," Simba said, without hesitation. "I'm not afraid to do it."

What he spoke was that truth. He'd killed several creatures since deciding to become the danger rather than be subjected to it. So far, he had killed Nyoka the python, the hunters from the underground dinosaur world and the Thief. It just seemed like an ordinary action to him now. Murder was all too easy.

"You? Kill me?" Virusi laughed. "I'd like to see you try. What are you gonna do? Throw me in the river like Mr Stupid over there?"

The Interceptor growled loudly, looking like he was just itching to leap at Virusi. Nala and Haiba thought that he might lash out in anger at any second. There was no telling how destructive a fight between him and the living virus could turn... The whole resort might go up in flames!

"I'm smarter than him," Simba said. "I can think of a much better way to destroy you. Now, tell me what you know—or else."

"Never," said Virusi. "My creator can't have you causing any more trouble around here. You have to die. That's why he made me. For the purpose of destroying you and setting his plan in motion."

"You're going to see the Hermit of Hekima," Simba said. "The Interceptor told us. We visited him before, you know. And he said he didn't know anything about the spell that surrounds the remains of the Pride Lands. Are you sure you've got the right guy?"

"The Hermit of Hekima is a liar," Virusi told him. "Of course he is. He lied because he knew that my creator was watching. Thought he could try and trip him up, you see."

"So he lied to protect himself?" Simba asked, surprised. *I don't believe it... That's just selfish!*

"And you three," Virusi said, much to their surprise. "How noble. But my creator is far too smart to be fooled by the lies of

some eagle. He knows *exactly* what the hermit is hiding. And it's my job to extract it from him. Once I'm finished with you, of course."

So he did care about us? Simba suddenly felt a little bad for thinking wrongly of the hermit. He was clearly a good soul. *Much purer than you...* He frowned at the saddening thought, the ramifications of his actions sinking in.

"Not if I can help it," Simba said courageously. "We can get to the hermit first. And warn him before you can do anything. I don't know who your creator is, or what he's planning, but I'm gonna stop it."

"If you live long enough," Virusi said, and thrust his claw right towards Simba's face.

"Look out!" The Interceptor dived at Simba, colliding with his side. The two rolled across the ground, coming to a halt by the edge of the river. "You really need to work on your reactions, you know that?"

"Thanks," Simba said, clambering to his paws. He had to admit that the last thing he expected today was to be saved by the Interceptor from a living virus. That was the kind of thing that only ever happened in very strange dreams.

But then his life was quite strange, anyway.

"Don't think you can keep him away from me for long, Interceptor," Virusi said. "You will all burn, just as my creator has instructed."

"I wish you'd tell me who your creator was," Simba said. "If he's so scary, then why can't he come down here and face me himself? Only a coward gets someone else to do his dirty work for him."

"It's all part of the plan, Simba," Virusi said, taking a swipe at Simba with his claw. But the cub dodged out of the way. "Now, surrender—and I'll try not to make it too painful."

"Be careful, Simba," Nala warned. She looked at Haiba. "We have to do something. That thing is going to kill Simba eventually, no matter how hard he fights."

"Well, I don't know what to do," Haiba said. "And I'm not kissing him as a distraction. I don't want to catch something."

"Oh, so you'll make out with Hago's staff but you won't go near a living virus?" Nala retorted. "So much for you loving everything and everyone."

"We all have standards, Nala," Haiba said. "Even me."

"Just think of something!" she snapped.

Simba leapt to his right at he avoided a lunge from Virusi and his lethal claw. He dreaded to think what would happen if he touched him with it...

"You can't keep dodging for ever," Virusi said, pushing Simba to the ground and pinning him down with only one paw. His claws dug tightly into his chest, causing the cub to cry out in agony. The living virus laughed, making it look easy. "See what I mean? Your luck has gotta run out sometime."

Simba gasped as he saw Virusi's magma-like claw inching towards his throat...

Thwack!

Virusi was knocked aside as a rock pelted him in the side of his neck. He let out a yell of momentary pain, his eyes locking onto the culprit.

It was Nala. And she was ready to throw more rocks, too. "Stay away from him," she said threateningly, prepared to throw another one.

Virusi growled, pouncing right at Nala. But the Interceptor grabbed one of his back legs and threw him straight into a nearby tree. Upon impact, the living virus dug his claw into the tree, reducing it to ashes in a matter of seconds.

"I'm beginning to see why my creator wanted you dead," Virusi said, amazed at how evasive these cubs could be. They were more slippery than an oily puddle. It was like nothing could hurt them. "It's like no one can touch you."

The four exchanged worried glances with each other. It was clear that minor aggravations such as throwing rocks weren't going to deter him from his mission. They either had to kill him—which was unlikely at the moment—or run away.

They opted for the latter.

"I think we should get out of here," Haiba said, resulting in nods from Simba, Nala and the Interceptor. They soon began to swiftly clear out of the resort, as Virusi gave chase to them once more.

"*Get back here!*" the living virus yelled, but it was no use. Simba, Nala, Haiba and the Interceptor had quickly disappeared into the trees and bushes that comprised the enormous jungle. They were soon completely out of sight. Virusi was an extraordinary creature, but he couldn't see through stubborn objects. They could have scattered in any direction by now.

"*Damn it!*" Virusi slashed through the low branch of a tree in anger, slicing it in two with ease. "Why won't those little brats just die already? It's bad enough that they're the most annoying animals on earth! The fact that they don't give in just makes it worse!"

The living virus stood there in the empty resort, deciding on how to proceed with things. *If I keep trying to chase them, then they're just gonna find somewhere to hide.* He smiled, as a suitable alternative occurred to him. *I think it's time for a change of plan. I'm sure that hermit would appreciate an early visit...*

Virusi grinned evilly, and headed off in the direction of the desert.

It was time to see the Hermit of Hekima.

AN: Looks like Virusi has swapped around his objectives. Can the cubs get to the Hermit of Hekima before he does? You'll have to wait and see. I'll be very pleased to hear more theories from you. A little more is revealed with each chapter, if you look hard enough... See you tomorrow!

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: The Taking

AN: We're coming to the end of the first part of the finale. Already things are slowly starting to develop. I've been reading the reviews, and I've gotta say that I'm loving the speculation. It really makes my day. Keep it coming!

the-mysterious-other: The Interceptor is a lot less evil than in his first appearance, isn't he? Saving Simba has definitely improved his image. He's an interesting ally now...

LionKingFactsGuy2: I pride myself on my twists. I'll keep 'em coming!

Chapter Seven: The Taking

Simba, Nala, Haiba and the Interceptor finally came to a halt in the middle of a small clearing, having been running non-stop in order to evade the deadly threat that was Virusi. They were still keeping an eye out for him even as they stopped...

"Okay," Simba panted, his chest aching with exhaustion. "Okay. I think he's stopped chasing us."

Simba had a sinking feeling, deep down in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't help it. It felt ominous to him. The arrival of Virusi signalled the start of something big. Something that would not only affect the jungle, but the entire world. If only he could figure out what his plan was...

"I've never ran that fast in my life," Nala gasped, collapsing against a tree. "I hope he's just as tired as we are."

"I don't think viruses get tired," the Interceptor said. He was the only one of the four who didn't appear incredibly fatigued by their lengthy run. After all, he was used to running and jumping all the time. His 'job' required him to be extensively active. "That guy can keep on going for ever."

"We're lucky we got away," Haiba said, sitting himself down on a small rock. "I don't like the look of that guy's claw. It'd probably go right through us. It was a pretty dumb move to take him on like that, Simba."

"Well, what else was I supposed to do?" Simba retorted, glaring at him. "Just let him kill us all?"

"That wasn't what I meant," Haiba said. "What if you died? We're only barely surviving with just four of us. Why make things worse?"

"I wonder if my mom's okay," Nala said, suddenly reminded of her. *She's probably with Zazu*, she thought. *I just hope that virus hasn't found her...*

"How far would it take to get to this hermit?" the Interceptor asked. "I'm not usually one for saving the day, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna let that virus disrupt my life. I want to kill him!"

"I think we have more than just him to worry about," Haiba said, frowning. "You heard what he said. His 'creator' is the one who wants him to kill us. If only we could figure out who it is."

"He looked like Death," Nala said, causing Simba to give her a funny stare. "What? He does."

"I killed Death," Simba stated, thinking back to their confrontation together. Both of them had died in the conflict; a mysterious being who went by the name of You-Know-Who resurrected Simba, however. If that hadn't happened, then both he and Nala would have been dead a long time ago... "He can't come back."

"You don't know that," Nala said. "We knew very little about him. I mean, he's the root of all evil. Isn't it just a *little* bit possible that he can come back to life?"

"Nope," Simba said. "There was nothing left. I made sure of that. I'm sure evil can carry on just fine without him."

"Just standing around here speculating isn't going to help," Haiba interjected. "We have to find the Hermit of Hekima. We can use that secret underground tunnel to get there quicker, can't we?"

"We should be able to get there way before that virus does," Simba said optimistically. "Then maybe we stand a chance of getting our home back."

"But he lied," Nala said, unable to believe it. "Why would he do that? He looks like one of the most truthful animals out there."

"That virus said it was to protect us," Simba told her. "But what from? Him?"

"The 'creator', I imagine," replied Haiba. "Maybe the hermit knows who he is. But we're not gonna find out by just standing here."

"You're right," Simba agreed. "Let's go."

"Something's up with this cub," Sarafina said, placing Ugaidi gently on the ground by the riverside. He was still completely unconscious after overloading with fear earlier. "I wish I knew what it was."

"Sarafina, I strongly suggest that you stop paying attention to the ramblings of this inept cub," Zazu advised, unimpressed by how determined she seemed to wake Ugaidi from his unconscious state. "It's quite clear that there is very little left of his mind."

"Zazu, it's obvious that something has frightened him," Sarafina said. "He can see into the future. There's no telling what he might have witnessed."

"He's witnessed *nothing*," Zazu stressed. "If some sort of apocalyptic event were to occur, then I'm very sure that there would have been some noticeable signs by now!"

"Who says there *haven't* been any noticeable signs?" the lioness retorted. "I'm pretty sure that Ugaidi is one of them. Behind all that insanity, he's hiding something. Some kind of secret. We just need to get through to him."

Sarafina glanced around the empty space of the resort, and wondered where the other cubs had gotten to. "The one time you need them, and they're not here..." she murmured, before dipping a paw into the river and splashing water across Ugaidi's face.

The result was instantaneous. Ugaidi coughed and spluttered, awakening immediately from his slumber. He caught sight of Sarafina and Zazu, and became terrified in a matter of seconds. He attempted to back away and escape, but the river behind him prevented that. It was either fall into the water or face the other two animals. He had no choice.

"The sickness," he said, eyes wide. "We must hide. Hide from the sickness. It will infect us all... There is nothing you can do to stop him."

"Ugaidi, you have to calm down," Sarafina said soothingly, speaking to him the way she would speak to her daughter. She was pretty good when it came to taking care of cubs. She was a very experienced mother, having looked after Nala on her own ever since she was born. "We have to understand what you're so afraid of. We're not going to hurt you."

"The sickness..." Ugaidi was squirming uncomfortably on the spot, as if he would rather be anywhere than here. "He has been here already. The mark... the mark is underneath your paws."

Sarafina lifted one of her forepaws to reveal that some of the land below was cracked and scarred, glowing with an orangey colour that wasn't too dissimilar to magma. It was like someone had been slashing right through it. "What is going on around here?"

"The sickness. The virus." Ugaidi's eyes were darting around in terror. It was as though he thought that the creature would appear in the resort there and then. "He will begin the plan. And none shall survive."

"How do you know this, Ugaidi?" Sarafina questioned softly, placing a paw gently on the cub's shoulder. "How do you know?"

"The gift," Ugaidi mumbled, slowly collapsing onto his back. "He gave me the gift..."

He passed out once more, completely motionless.

Sarafina and Zazu exchanged curious looks with one another, unsure what to make of Ugaidi's ramblings.

But then were they really ramblings? Or perhaps something much more important?

"I think we have to find Simba," Sarafina said. "Before something horrible happens."

Virusi emerged from the opening of the underground tunnel, which had allowed him to cross underneath the desert with ease. His creator had provided him with enough geographical knowledge to know his way around, so finding the secret

tunnel wasn't hard. The Hermit of Hekima certainly liked to keep things hidden...

But not for long.

Virusi slashed aside bushes and branches that were blocking his way, getting closer and closer to the spot where the hermit resided. He smiled widely when he reached his destination: a wide clearing that opened out onto a massive rocky cliff. It overlooked an enormous, beautiful river about one hundred feet below.

The sky was beginning to turn an orangey purple colour; the evening was quickly drawing in. The sun was already starting to set. Thanks to the relatively bright illumination, it didn't take long for the living virus to spot the golden eagle.

He was perched on one of the cliff's long protruding edges, staring out at the endless waters. It appeared that the Hermit of Hekima had failed to notice Virusi, so he was none the wiser to his presence.

That was about to change.

Virusi chuckled as he approached the hermit, smiling evily. "You thought you could hide all the way out here, huh, hermit?"

The living virus didn't see the Hermit of Hekima smile. "I knew you were coming," the golden eagle said, his back to Virusi. "I sensed your presence hours ago. Such strong evil is very easy to detect."

Virusi snarled as the Hermit of Hekima turned around to face him. "So you know why I'm here?"

The hermit nodded. "Of course," he said. "You want to kill me. Because you know, don't you?"

"My *creator* knows," said Virusi. "You lied to those cubs, didn't you? To protect them and yourself?"

"Not exactly," said the Hermit of Hekima, much to Virusi's bemusement. "I lied to them because I knew that this would happen."

"You can't tell the future," Virusi said. "Only read minds."

"I know," agreed the golden eagle. "But it's all too obvious why that spell was put around the Pride Lands. I knew right from the start that it was the work of something deadly. Whoever your creator is, he certainly has something huge planned. And that's why you need me." He spread his long wings. "I'm something huge."

"Something *powerful*," Virusi retorted, brandishing his razor-sharp claw. "And you have that power."

The Hermit of Hekima smiled, totally unafraid. "Whatever you're planning, it won't work," he said. "Those cubs will stop you."

"They don't know a thing that's going on," Virusi replied. "By the time they figure everything out, it will all be too late."

"We'll see," the Hermit of Hekima said.

Virusi frowned—

—and plunged his claw right into the golden eagle's chest.

The living virus laughed evily as the Hermit of Hekima gasped in pain, his claw penetrating right through the golden eagle's chest. The hermit stood there, transfixed, devoid of all movement.

With a horrible squelching noise, Virusi finally removed the dangerous appendage from the Hermit of Hekima's chest. A blue orb—about the size of an orange—was stuck on the tip of his claw, extracted right from the golden eagle.

Virusi had exactly what he wanted.

The living virus didn't look back as the Hermit of Hekima let out a dying screech, falling from the edge of the cliff and plummeting one hundred feet into the river below. A loud *splash* punctuated his fate.

From then, all that could be heard were Virusi's maniacal laughs, echoing away into the evening sky...

"Where is he?"

Simba looked around in confusion, stood on the edge of the cliff as the light evening breeze swirled around him. This was where the Hermit of Hekima usually lived. He couldn't think of anywhere else he might be.

"This is where he normally is," Simba said. "At least, that's where he was when we saw him. I don't know where else he would go."

"He wouldn't just vanish," Nala said. She stared out into the distance, bright sunlight shining down on her. "Man, it's bright up here." She glanced aside from the light, momentarily staring down at the ground.

That was when she saw it.

"Simba, look," Nala said, holding something up.

"What is it?"

It didn't take him long to see that Nala was holding a blood-stained feather.

It didn't take him long to see that Virusi had been here.

It didn't take him long to see that the Hermit of Hekima was dead.

"Oh, that's brilliant," the Interceptor sighed, hitting the ground in frustration. "So the only guy who could have helped us is *dead*?"

Simba frowned, his face tight. "Yeah." He was desperately trying to disguise the despair that he felt in his heart. "He's dead."

"Oh, no..." Nala felt her stomach sink. Her grip loosened on the bloody feather, allowing the breeze to scatter it into the air, disappearing into the sunset.

"Whatever happened, he got what he wanted," the Interceptor said. "Stupid virus."

"His secret died with him," Haiba said sadly.

Simba suddenly turned his attention to Haiba. "You said you saw him."

Haiba narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"You." Simba took a step towards Haiba, eyeing him with curiosity. "Earlier. Before the Interceptor showed up. You said that you saw the Hermit of Hekima the other day. How? Why?"

"Yeah," Nala agreed, staring at Haiba as well. "You *did* say that. Why? Why would he have visited you, Haiba?"

"It was when you disappeared, wasn't it?" Simba demanded, looking very angry. "Tell us the truth, Haiba. *Now*."

"Uh... um..." Haiba shifted awkwardly on the spot, feeling helplessly trapped. He swallowed hard, as all eyes were on him. He took a deep breath—

—and uttered three words which he deeply regretted.

"I killed Tama."

To Be Continued...

AN: Ooh, that was an absolutely *diabolical* cliffhanger! Haiba's finally told the truth about Tama's death. Not to mention the Hermit of Hekima is dead! No! I loved that guy! How will all of this affect the rest of the group? Well, I'm sure you guys will come up with some more interesting theories for me to read concerning that.

So, that leaves me with just two more stories to write. I'll see you tomorrow with the first two chapters of *The Final Task*!

NEXT TIME: Virusi continues with his creator's plan... Can Simba stop him before it's too late?